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## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BAKOLA AND THE BANTU PEOPLES OF THE COASTAL REGIONS OF CAMEROON AND THEIR PERCEPTION OF COMMERCIAL FOREST EXPLOITATION

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**ABSTRACT** The relationships between the Bakola Pygmies and the Bantu cultivators of the coastal region of Cameroon differ from one group to another. The relationship appears superficial and limited to economic exchange between the Bakola and the Bassa, Boulou, Bakoko, Mvae, Fang, Evouzok and Yassa, whereas it is based on their culture between the Bakola and the Kwassio speaking groups. In spite of such a variation in their relationships, the Bakola and Bantu groups share the same forest environment which indubitably conditions their everyday life. This paper describe in depth hitherto poorly recorded relationships between the Bakola and the Bantu, and their implications for examining the commercial exploitation of the forest, which comprises their major source of life, but which is threatened by large scale logging industries.

**Key Words:** Inter-ethnic relationship, Bakola Pygmies, Bantu cultivators, Tropical forest, Industrial forest exploitation

### INTRODUCTION

The coastal region of Cameroon is inhabited by various ethnic groups, such as the Bakola (Pygmies), the Ngoumba, Fang, Boulou, Mvae, Mabea, Bakoko, Evouzok, Batanga, Yassa, Bassa, and other Bantu-speaking groups, and there exist inter-ethnic relationships among these different groups. In particular, between the Bakola (Pygmies) and Bantu cultivators, there has been a close relationship for at least a hundred years or more. Centuries of Bakola/Bantu interactions have made them share the perceptions of the forests, and build a deeper relationship, that have led to further biological and cultural intermixture. While the forest has always occupied a pivotal position in this relationship, the Bakola and other Bantu peoples have helplessly witnessed the exploitation of “their” forest by the State and logging companies (authorized or otherwise), which has degraded their forest environment. The large-scale exploitation of the forest ecosystem and the absence of its sustainable management plan have had adverse consequences to the life of the people living in it. Today, more than ever, the situation seems in a critical condition and calls for a closer look in order to find out what has changed among these peoples, between them and the forest, and to seek solutions in this new condition.

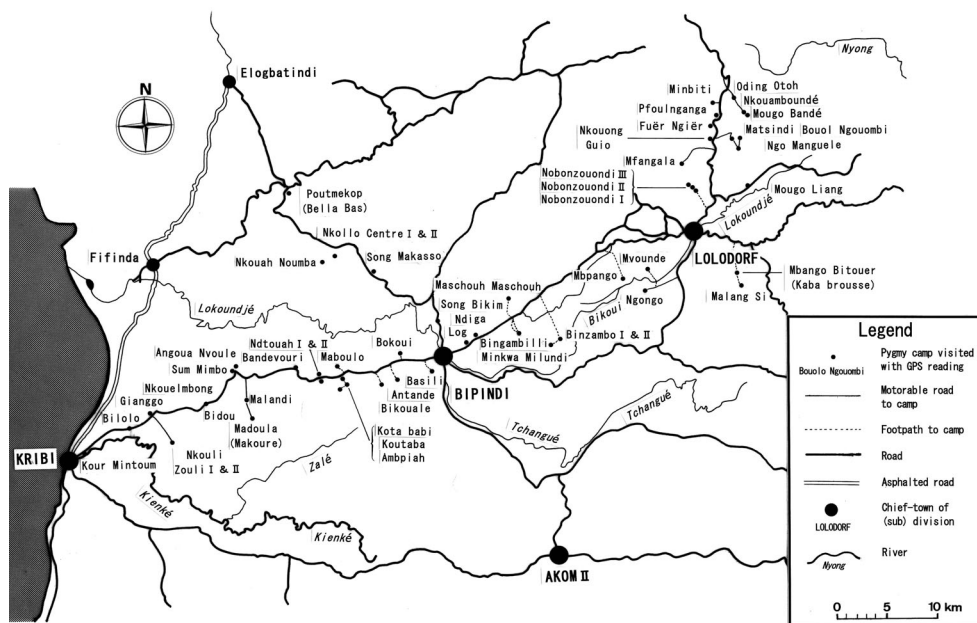


Fig. 1. Study area.

This study covers the entire forest area exploited by WIJMA (a logging company of Dutch origin which exploits timber in the Kribi, Akom II, Bipindi and Lolodorf subdivisions of the Ocean Division in the South Province), the Campo subdivision in the same Division, the Ma'an Subdivision in the Mvilla Division (Ebolowa), the Messondo, Eseka and Makak Subdivisions of the Nyong-et-Kelle Division in the Central Province <sup>(1)</sup> (Fig. 1). Also, the Mvilla and Nyong-et-Kelle divisions inhabited respectively by the Boulou and Mvae, and the Bassa, were studied.

The Bakola live in an environment of humid evergreen and semi-deciduous forests. The fauna and flora reserves of Campo, Kienke, Mvilla, Nyabizan and Nyong are dominated by high trees (40 to 60 m) below which grows a thicket that constitutes an undergrowth making the passage difficult. The climate is that of the South and Central Cameroon: two dry seasons (a long one from mid-November to mid-March and a short one from mid-June to mid-August) and two rainy seasons (a long one from mid-August to mid-November, and a short one from mid-March to mid-June). With abundant fauna, hunting remains traditionally the backbone of the socio-economic organization of the Bakola and continues to be of major economic and cultural importance, not only for the sale of game meat, but also for the confidential and secular relations between the Bakola and Bantu of the coastal region.

Since 1983 and within the framework of several research projects and programs, all the Bakola (Pygmies) camps in the coastal region, including those created in June 1999 were surveyed, in order to locate their camps, the Bantu villages to which

they are attached, and hunting grounds in the forest, for a complete census of the Bakola of the coastal region. This census was also aimed to totally integrate the Bakola into the national community and have them participate in all development projects brought into their society.

The major methods used for this research were interviews, questionnaires, participatory observation in Bakola Pygmy camps and Bantu villages, simple observation and daily personal notes.

## BAKOLA/BANTU RELATIOSHIPS

### I. Origin Myth of the Relationship

The relationships between the Bakola and the various Bantu populations mentioned above differ from one clan to another of the same ethnic group, and even from one individual to another. The frequency, quality and quantity of gifts and counter-gifts exchanged, assistance and services provided, and even the forms of partnership itself, show a considerable variation. Hence, one often hears the Bakola themselves say that they are in better terms with a certain group than with others, that they intermarry more with a certain group than others, that they receive more humane treatment and consideration from a particular group. There are mythical and historical accounts that the Bakola had been associated with the Kwassio (Ngoumba, Mabea, Pfiébouri) through the ages and came to the present location with the Kwassio, with whom they belonged to the same linguistic group (Guthrie, 1948).

There is a well-known tale of the Bakola who went into the hinterlands after first discovering the sea, where they cooked and ate a red-mouthed fish, *ngwawa* (unidentified species), which retained both its color and smell after being cooked. The story was narrated by Ngiebouri Nazareth, a Nkola (singular form of Bakola) man to the southeast of Campo, Manzouer Marie, a Bouandjo Nkola in his sixties living to the north of Campo, and also by Ntounga Mawoung Pierre, a Nkola man in his seventies living to the southeast of Bipindi. Campo is mostly inhabited by the Mvae and Yassa, while Bipindi by Kwassio, Bassa, Fang, Boulou, Evouzok, etc. Campo and Bipindi are some 145 km apart by road, and the Bakola groups of these areas are in contact with the Bantus of different linguistic and cultural groups; the similarity of the tale recounted by the three Bakola groups is noteworthy. The three different narratives collected from the distant places were compared for the veracity of the story.

Here is the story itself.

One day, four men decided to set out for an expedition to the forest to hunt and to search for a better environment to live in. They are: 1) Ngounga, a Nkola (singular form of Bakola); 2) Bikili, a Kwassio; 3) Ngimatanda, a Bonoho; 4) Koh, a Kombe or Yassa or Bongwe. After several days of trekking, the four pilgrims were blocked by a very large tree, *lande* (*Terminalia superba*), beyond which they could not go. They started digging a large hole on one of its roots in order to carve out a route and get to the other side. The job was very tedious. Ngounga, a Nkola man said to

his peers: "We have worked much and we are hungry. I will go and look for game in the forest, and we shall have strength to dig into the tree." He set out without stopping.

The ancient Bakola considered bees (*banyu ba nkwano* or *Apis mellifera*) useful to hunters, especially as a clock. For the Bakola, the sound of bees meant it was time to rest and sleep. Although Ngounga had not heard the sound of bees returning to their hives, suddenly, he heard buzzing from the west. He had never been passed by bees and not noticed it. Was it a good or bad omen? For several hours, he traced the buzzing of the bees to discover their hive. The sound became louder. The night was gradually falling and Ngounga was tired because of the long walk since morning. The night fell, and he was taken by surprise in the forest. He believed he was near the hive and its honey. After some more walking, he found himself, not under the tree, but instead on a sandbank facing a "large river," that was producing the frightful sound that he had mistaken for the buzzing of bees. Tired, stunned and frightened, he sat down nearby and admired the strange movements of this "river" that extended as far as the eyes could reach, in spite of the darkness of the night. The river seemed even luminous. At that moment no precise idea crossed his mind; he could not even have a simple bath.

"I am hungry," Ngounga thought, "but I will no longer hunt because it is dark; I will wait for the morning here before crossing the "river" and then return to my friends. He laid down hungry on the sand, soothed by the wind, the sound of the waves and the coolness of the famous mysterious river. The waves rose and fell, frightening Ngounga who had never seen such a thing before. He was frightened and edged towards the dry ground. A few minutes later the waves caught up with him. Hungry and exhausted as he was, he caught, as manna from heaven, a red-mouthed fish, *ngwawa*, which was thrown at his feet by a violent wave.

He collected wood from the nearby forest, prepared a fireplace on the sand and roasted the fish. He cut some leaves, scaled his red-mouthed fish, made a bundle (*dumbo*) of the fish and added some curiously salty water from the strange river. An hour later, he removed his bundle from the fire, believing that it was well done just like the freshwater fishes he knew. He discovered with annoyance that his fish was still raw. White flesh, red mouth, unchanged smell. He retied the bundle and placed it back on the fire, thinking that he needed much more time to cook it well. Three times during the night he repeated the cooking, and was disappointed. "The fish here is as strange as the river in which it lives," he said. He fell asleep. Early next morning when he woke up, he untied his bundle for the fourth time to discover that the red-mouthed fish had changed neither color nor smell. He then decided to eat it to have the strength needed to return to his friends' which was a day's trek from the "large river." He ate the fish, not convinced that it was cooked. "What a strange fish! Strange river with only one bank!" After eating without appetite, Ngounga started his way back in fright, deeply moved and very eager to recount what he had witnessed to the other three who certainly must have believed him missing, attacked and killed by a ferocious animal in the forest. He arrived late and tired at the foot of the *lande* tree (*Terminalia superba*) where he found the other three worried, in tears, ready to set off the next morning in search of him. He nevertheless told them all he had done and witnessed during his short misfortune. "This large river with red-mouthed, cook-proof fish is yet worth looking at and admiring," he told them. "After regaining my strength, I will lead you there and maybe some of us may love it and choose to live there forever. Anyway, just know that my peregrination ended at the bank of that river."

Two days later, they all set out to discover the large mysterious river, the one-banked river with red-mouthed fish. Ngomatanda, a Banoho, and Koh, a Kombe (or Yassa or Bongwe), were very much pleased, and decided to take up residence there. "We are not returning to the forest," they told Ngounga and Bikili both at once. "We will remain here to paddle and fish from the mysterious river." The great explorer Ngounga, a Nkola, and Bikili, a Kwassio, were very much surprised. They stayed together for four more days. On the fifth day, Ngounga and Bikili left them and went back to the forest to hunt and cultivate the soil. Since then, Ngounga lived with the Kwassio whom he never left, and even went as far as learning their language, joining their clans and adopting some of their ways and customs.

## II. The Bakola/Ngoumba Relationship

### 1. *A relationship stronger than with other Bantu groups*

While the origin of Bakola/Bantu relationship varies from one group to another, it appears to be well established between the Bakola and the Kwassio groups (Ngoumba, Mabea). Bakola/Ngoumba relationship is long-standing. According to Loung (1958), the relationship dates as far back as the early 19th century, when the Kwassio people migrated to their present location. The Bakola are believed to have "led the Kwassio across the forest massifs right to their present location" (Loung, 1958). Others even trace the relationship to the ancient Egyptian period. Another source, mythological narratives of the Bakola and some Kwassio griots of more than 90 years ago, relates the above tale of a Nkola, called Ngounga, leading the Kwassio and the Batanga across the forests and rivers right to the sea.

According to the oral traditions of both groups, the Kwassio cultivators were willing to leave the Great Lake region of the eastern Congo to conquer new territory, and asked the "Pygmy" hunters-gatherers who knew the forest to guide them in their long and uncertain travel across the great forest. They arrived and settled at Bung-Ngwang and Messa'a Mena in eastern Cameroon. *Bung* in Kwassio language means "where one can bathe." *Ngwang* is the name given to river Nyong. Bung-Ngwang therefore means the area prepared for bathing in the River Nyong, and *Ngwang* comes from the verb *-gwang*, meaning a stream or river regularly frequented by fish; or a fruit tree, by birds or animals. Messa'a Mena stands for a four-way intersection. These names were later transformed into Abong-Mbang and Messa Mena by European colonialists.

Unsatisfied with the abundance of fish in river Nyong, the Kwassio (*kwa-sio* = search for elephant tusks) asked their Bakola scouts and guides to set out once more in search of salt. Defying several difficulties, they arrived together at the present settlement sites towards the end of 19th century. The Ngoumba lived in the interior of the Kwassio country, whereas the Mabea settled along the coast which today they share with the Batanga (Banoho) and the Yassa (Bungu). The first two went back to the hinterlands and settled there, leaving the Batanga and Yassa, who were good at maritime fishing, at the coast.

Since this time, the Kwassio and the Bakola have been lived together. The Kwassio live in small hamlets along the roads and supply cloths, hunting weapons,

starchy foods, etc. to the Bakola, who live in the forest and supply the other with forest meat (Ngima, 1993). Oral tradition maintains that during the above travels they learned to live together, that Bakola adopted the names of the Kwassio clans, and that the Kwassio treated the Bakola as members of their families, protecting them against outside enemies, and giving them foodstuffs and iron implements in return for the miscellaneous services and forest products. The Kwassio were considered as “masters” living in the village, and the Bakola were taken under their protection with the knowledge and mastery of the forest world. The Kwassio who had become masters refer to the Bakola in terms of possession: *ngieli nwang* or *bogiel bang* (my Pygmy or my Pygmies). The Bakola in turn call the Kwassio *mi* (plural *bi*) *nwang* (my Bantu, my master).

The preponderantly influential Kwassio were well acquainted with the absolute need of iron by the Bakola. Since the Kwassio wanted to prosper through the sale of ivory to Europeans, they made iron scarce, and began to barter with the Bakola: iron objects for elephant tusks and game meat. Some Kwassio demanded the Bakola to become “their Pygmies,” “their possession,” their “family, or clan members,” for a regular supply of iron to them to hunt more elephants. The more Bakola a Kwassio possessed, the more he could obtain elephant tusks and prosper. He became increasingly influential among his kin, and eventually became a notable, dignitary or a chief. The Kwassio/Bakola relationship would have been limited only to trade and exchange of goods, as in other areas, had there not been a deeper blood relationship between the two groups. In fact, unilateral marriage practices in which Kwassio men marry Bakola women, and the children born from such marriage, have provided an opportunity for a spatial and temporal development of a long standing Bakola /Ngoumba relationship. The Kwassio are believed to have adopted and appropriated the Bakola, paying bridewealth for them to marry, imposing their language and clan system.

In the absence of earlier written document on the relationship between the Bakola and Kwassio before the 19th century, historians, geographers, colonial administrators (Germans especially) and some anthropologists still refer to this time when they date the relationship between the two ethnic groups. But the myth mentioned above, and the fact such as the Bakola being the primary inhabitants of the forest who must have had barter relationship with any of the surrounding Bantu ethnic groups suggest that their relationship may be traced well before the arrival of colonialists.

The Bakola and the Bantu (Ngoumba) have common dances called *bapea*, *bideh* and *mbala*, and use the same instruments, the same rhythm, sing almost the same songs and maintain the same body movements. Also, the art of cooking including the use of condiments are quite similar between the two groups. There are however some differences in housing and clothing today, since the earliest German administrators and historians who arrived in Lolodorf and Bipindi documented that they met the Ngoumba living in huts and wearing G -strings (Kurt and Zenker).

There are more evidences in favor of a historically long Bakola/Ngoumba relationship, and of the adoption of cultural characteristics and social organization of the other group. Firstly, all the Bakola of the coastal region (the Ocean and the neighboring Divisions) are known to have lived in the Ngoumba area (Lolodorf and

Bipindi-Kribi areas) before they dispersed to the settlements of the Fang, Bassa, Bakoko, Boulou, Mvae and Ntoumou. The dispersion is attributed to maltreatment received from the Ngoumba, search for forests with more game, search for more affectionate masters, for greater autonomy (Loung & Ngima, 1983; 1985; 1986), or progressive sedentarization in sparsely populated other areas.

More than three-quarters of the person I interviewed preferred living with their Kwassio (Ngoumba) "brothers," to leaving and losing what they had acquired there and returning as strangers to the original Kwassio area. When asked with which Bantu group they preferred to cohabit, most Bakolas answered: "we are Ngoumba Pygmies and would like to live with the Ngoumba. But given that we settled here a long time ago, where else do you expect us to go to? The Bassa, Fang and Boulou maltreat us more; but there is nothing we can do, for we have our lands and farms here and we have already buried our grandparents, brothers, and children here. If we leave this place, where shall we go to?"

A Nkola living with the Ngoumba even proffered: "Other tribes maltreat and despise us too much. If other Bakola group live with them, it is because they are used to it; those in other areas tell us of their misfortune and disappointments and wish to come back here. But what will they receive on their return?" The Lolodorf, Bipindi and Kribi subdivisions, with a high Kwassio population on the major Lolodorf-Kribi road, have more Bakola residents than all other neighboring subdivisions and divisions put together. Of the 5,000 Bakola recorded in 1983 and 1997 (Loung et al., 1987; Froment et al., 1996; 1997), as many as 3,500 individuals lived in the areas with high Kwassio concentration.

The fact that the Bakola and the Kwassio are classified in the same linguistic group, Maka-Njem (A80 according to Guthrie, 1948), also support centuries-long contacts between these peoples. The Maka-Njem linguistic group A 80 consists of the Ngoumba, Mabea and Bakola in southwest Cameroon, and Maka, Njem, So, Bikele in southeast Cameroon (Loung, 1987). The Bakola throughout these regions understand the Ngoumba language, and more than three quarters of adults can actually speak it (Loung, 1987). On the other hand, "the Pygmies of the Ngoumba" speak only Bakola (Bagieli in Guthrie's classification) or Ngoumba language, and understand languages such as Fang and Bassa, only after a long contact (Ngima, 1993).

All the Bakola belong to the same clans as the Kwassio and they do not conceal it. The Bakola have clan names such as Biwandi, Litoumbo, Biyuele, Sabvila, Sabvang, Bimbpalang, Bitouer, Nti, all of which are also the major clan names of the Kwassio. These are found even in the Bakola settlements in the areas of Bassa, Boulou, Bakoko, and other groups. The villagers and the Bakola pronounce these clan names in the same manner.

Whether the Bakola borrowed the Kwassio clan system and its names or vice-versa is yet to be established. Many anthropologists and other researchers consider the former case is more likely (Loung, 1959), but the Bakola themselves do not confirm it. My opinion is that the numerical superiority of the Kwassio and their political domination over the Bakola should not be taken as a factor for establishing a historical fact. Furthermore, the Bakola loving with the Fang, Bassa, or Boulou, have adopted the clans of these peoples only temporarily, simply because they have



settled in the villages of these clans. The two Bassa clans of Memel I and II, for instance, are Logsol and Logsea (with a common ancestor Bikim Bi Godog Bi Sol) who are the “owner” of the Bakola of Memel I and II. The Bassa say their Bakola belong to their clans, but the Bakola consider themselves to be of the Sabvila, Sassieng and Nti clans. The Bakola of Mvie are said to be of the Yenjok clan (the only clan of Mvie village), which is the clan of their former “master” Evina Tonkoun. But the Bakola themselves hold that they are Biyuele and Litoumbo. Marriages between these Boulou (Yenjok) and the Bakola (Litoumbo and Biyuele) are frequent, which is not the case between a Ngoumba man and a Nkola woman belonging to the clans with the same name.

## 2. *Historical and current Ngoumba/Bakola association*

The importance of the clan system to the Bantu groups in the southwest Cameroon is obvious. The clans conditioned the relationships of family, brotherhood, lineage, friendship between individuals, and classify marriageable and non-marriageable relationships, thereby serving as a solid basis for kinship relationship. There are clan name equivalents in most of these ethnic groups. For instance, the Ngoumba clans of Biwandi, Limanzouang, Binzougo and Sassieng are respectively referred to as Ndong, Yenjok, Yembvam and Esseng by the Beti, Boulou, Fang, Mvae and Ntounou. Thus, in the ancestral custom, the marriage between a Biwandi man and a Ndong woman, between a Limanzouang man and a Yenjok woman, and between other pairs of equivalent clans were prohibited, and violators were subjected to exemplary sanctions.

The relationships between the Bakola and the Noe extinct Ngoumba notables appear to have been excellent, judging from what a Nkola told me, for example, “my grand father was the Nkola (Pygmy) of Ngoua Nzie,” to name an influential notable. Other notables often mentioned are Bikim bi Godog and Evina Tonkoun. These “*mi*” (masters) provided the Bakola even bridewealth for their wives. “We were regular members in our *mi*’s house, sharing the joys and sorrows of the family, and feeling secure in this company...”

The notables were proud of owning the Bakola, and satisfied them socially, legally and economically. They paid bridewealth, made marriage negotiations with other Bakola and villagers, provided them material needs for clothing and schooling, promoted their culture by organizing the *bapea* dance at the village ceremonies and popularizing their therapeutic activities, and advised the Bakola to come to terms with various problems. They in turn received what they needed from their Bakola who had the power of procuring these things. Other villagers, therefore, considered such notables to be tough, hyper-protected, rich in manpower and food supply.

At the death of a notable, the Bakola ownership was handed down to the eldest son or, in his absence, to their junior brother, whose duty was not only to perpetuate the existing association, but also to render it fruitful and add a little more to the future generations. In the Lolodorf and Bipindi areas, some great figureheads are still fresh in the people’s memory. The influence of the great Bantu notables who “owned” the Bakola Pygmies has almost completely disappeared in the last two decades. It was destroyed by new generations concerned with other, more

pressing political and educational problems. The Bakola Pygmies of the Bitouer clan (*Bogiel bo Bitouer*) were called Mouamoua Pygmies (*Bogiel bo Mouamoua*) after the name of the notable Mouamoua. This group of Bitouer Bakola now live dispersed in the forests of the Mbango-Bitouer villages, far away from their “master” who no longer cares for them, and who needs them only during election propaganda.

The “Pygmies” of Bigbally (*Bogiel bo Bigbally*) or Loule “Pygmies” (*Bogiel bo Loule*) formerly belonged to the notable of Bikoui village from whose name Lolodorf derived (Loule-dorf, transcribed by the Germans as Lolodorf). No one took care of them after the death of the chief. They are found today in the Ngoumba and Bassa areas. The “Pygmies” of the Samale, Nti and Sabvila at Bidjouka (Bipindi Subdivision) were called Bakola of Mapfoundoer, Biguio and Song-Mbpile. The “Pygmies” who settled in the Bassa, Evouzok, Bakoko, Mvae, Ntoundou villages equally hold the names of the great notables of the villages. Hence in the Bassa village, there are Ndiga’s “Pygmies” (*Bako ba Ndiga*); in the Evouzok village there are Nguéle’s “Pygmies” (*Bekoe be Nguéle*), in the Bakoko village Aoue’s “Pygmies” (*Bako ba Aoue*); in the Boulou, Mvae and the Ntoundou villages, we have the “Pygmies” of Owoundi, Ela Wo’o, Menye (*Beyela* or *Bekoe be Owoundi*). Even though abandoned by the heirs of the notables, the Bakola continue to bear the inherited names for a long time in order to distinguish themselves from those who belonged to the less famous masters.

Nowadays, these relationships have completely changed. Despite ancestral kinship with Ngoumba notables, the Bakola no longer benefit from the heirs of the notables (Ngima, 1993). Thus, the Bakola now have a little more freedom from the Ngoumba Bantu domination. In effect, even when living in the village of his former master, a Nkola man may freely choose his new master, regardless of his clan membership, origin or ethnic grouping (Ngima, 1993). He can sell his game wherever, whenever, however and to whomever he wishes, or even buy manufactured goods anywhere at the market price.

Such an apparent independence of the Bakola from the Ngoumba has unfortunately brought about tensions and conflicts. “Pygmies are lazy and thieves; they refuse to change no matter what you do to them. Trying to educate them and make them become like us is a waste of time. It is even you who teach them to disobey us and to think that they are like us,” said a Ngoumba man. However, when there is a socio-cultural event organized in a Ngoumba village frequented by the Bakola, the Bakola are invited to the dancing and animation at night or for the “protection” of a family. Even some senior Ngoumba civil servants come secretly to see the animation in the forest, and ask for various charms for promotion, reappointment to high duties of the State, or for private and parapublic corporations.

Bakola/Bantu “associations” (Delobea, 1989) deteriorated. The Bantu maltreated the Bakola, who suffered from very humiliating daily: “You are Pygmies (*Biya Bogiel*, in Kwassio; *Mine Beyela*, in Boulou, Mvae or Ntoundou; *Ni ye Bako* in Bassa; *Ni le Bako* in Bakoko). You are animals good for eating,” “Go back to your home in the forest, you make our compound dirty and fill them with nauseating

odours,” “You were kept here by my father, but I have no family tie with you,” etc.

Very often and unjustly, the Bakola are taken to the customary court, slandered, beaten, chased and driven by all. Because they were no longer inherited “property,” and since they were rejected and thrown out by the heir, they returned to the forest, building huts on the old and sites, near or far from the Bantu village. Some moved in small groups to settle in the areas of the Bassa, Evouzok, Boulou or Mvae. Thus was the collapse of the alliances, or the “associations,” formed and maintained for decades by great notables and chiefs.

Today, there are only several Bantu groups in the entire coastal region who still maintain the “traditional” type of relationship with the Bakola. In the Kwassio land, there are a few Bakola families in the forest or the village, who still “belong” to a particular villager or to a particular clan of the village. They keep the relationship at their own will, and receive aids, gifts and various services at their master’s compound in cases of problems. Such a relationship is found among the Nabonzouondi and Mfangala Bakola, known as the “Pygmies” of Mr. Sylla, the head of the Ngoumba-south group of Mill village, among those of the Bitouer clan (the “Pygmies” of Maschouer at Mbango), and among those of Mr. Koumba at Lambi of Bipindi Sub-division. In the Kribi Sub-division, there are some groups at Grand-Zambi “owned” by Mr. Ngoua Jean, at Ndtouah by Mr. Mana, at Lobe by Mimpfoundi, a deceased Mabea traditional healer. Such masters who take a responsibility for the life of the Bakola are, however, very rare in the Bassa, Bakoko and Evouzok areas.

As the Mbvoumbo (Ngoumba language) and Bagielli (Bakola language) both belong to A80 group (Guthrie, 1948), the Ngoumba and Bakola communicate easily with each other, and refer to each other as “very close cousins.” All other ethnic groups of the coastal region describe them as “brothers,” and do not hesitate to ask a Ngoumba to obtain game or a charm from a Nkola. Although the extreme closeness of the two languages is perceived differently by the Ngoumba and Bakola, there is no doubt that the two groups share a long history of the use of a similar language for communication. But it is regrettable that the Bakola use Mbvoumbo language when they meet a Ngoumba, because otherwise, he would not listen attentively. Some Bakola were even pleased to speak Mbvoumbo, while the Ngoumba seemed disgusted when speaking in Bagielli. Today, the situation seems to show a different trend. Some Ngoumba speak in Bagielli to the Bakola, or to their Ngoumba kinsman in order to keep the content of their message secret, though it has an aftertaste, often a sad souvenir of amusement, joke and mockery.

### 3. *Trade between the Bakola and the Ngoumba*

While barter was the only form of trade until a few centuries ago, it has been diversified since then. The Bakola have become used to monetary exchange. The increasing involvement of the Bakola in market economy has ipso facto modified the nature of the Bakola/Ngoumba relationship. Prices of goods at their camps have become fixed as the prices in the villages (Ngima, 1993). However, despite the introduction of money and the new trade system into the area, barter of consumer goods remains predominant. This gives an advantage to the Ngoumba who produce

more foodstuff than their Bakola brothers. Because the Bakola are often short of starchy food, and suffer from hunger, they are often duped by their former masters.

The use of money by Bakola is limited to the purchase of a few kinds of consumer goods (soap, rice and kerosene). When they could by chance obtain a fair amount of money, it is mostly squandered on narcotics (alcohol, tobacco, cigarettes, marijuana). According to the economic survey conducted in 1992 on the Bakola and Mvae women of Campo, each woman annually obtained 145,000 francs (CFA). Out of this amount, the Nkola woman at best bought for herself one T-shirt and a simple pair of shorts, whereas the Mvae woman paid her son's school fees and improved her house through purchase of zinc sheets, kitchen utensils, furniture, clothing, farm tools, etc. (Ngima, 1993). Even those Bakola who worked with the logging companies, sold cocoa to buyers, or, were in permanent contact with *mi* (villagers), did not seem to alter such behavior of squandering.

#### 4. *The Bakola, the Ngoumba and the forest*

Manguiong Edouard, a famous traditional healer and the head of the Antande camp attached to the Ngoumba village of Madoungou, told me that he gained more money from traditional medicine than from the sale of game meat. The cash he obtained varied from 500 to 50,000 CFA, depending on the type of treatment. Even great hunters, by contrast, earn less and barely feed their family. The Bakola women daily collect starchy roots, sweet fruits, oily nuts, aromatic barks, mushrooms, and slow-moving animals, only to get by or for a little income.

"All the Bakola are finally returning to the forest for large-scale net hunting and invocation of protecting spirits," according to the head of the Antande camp. For the Bakola, the forest is a whole universe without which they cannot live. They think it unrealistic that the forest may sometimes disappear, while the much smaller Bantu villages survive. To induce sedentarization and development in place of the natural mythical milieu for political or any other reasons will, therefore, be fruitless. To deprive them of their forest would force them to live the life of a man without a soul. The exploitation of the forest for logging means "a slow and progressive death" for the Ngoumba and above all for the Bakola, who live solely by, in, with and for the forest. Where such an exploitation has taken place, edible wild yams have almost disappeared, fruit trees destroyed, animals escaped to remote forest parts, the soil damaged, medicinal plants ravaged by heavy machines, and protective spirits and providers of the game no longer reside. The spirits are wandering in the forest in search of more stable space. (Ngima, 1993).

The Ngoumba and Bakola have an abundant oral literature where trees, medicinal plants and hunting are very important. The entire life of these people, the Bakola in particular, is based on inspired by the forest. The forest for the Bakola is "the providential purveyor of abundant and varied food, but which calls for a daily concern because no reserves are made, except for smoked meat when some big game can not be entirely consumed in one or two days. For the Pygmies or for other Africans, God is the forest and the forest is God" (Turnbull, 1961).

### III. Bakola/Bassa Relationship

#### 1. *Imbalance in the relationship*

The Bassa of Bipindi and Nyong-et-Kelle also enjoy a long-standing relationship with the Bakola. "For a long time until now, we have lived the same life, we have become Pygmies; and if we despise them, what shall we do? Where shall we live? Who shall supply us regularly with game meat?" said a Bassa man. He even explained to me about the non-exploitative nature of Bassa/Bakola relationship: "The Whites consider you (intellectuals, business men, or advanced rich people) to be Pygmies, and you consider us (the local population) to be Pygmies through your thoughts and deeds, and we too have our Pygmies. But indeed, no one group can do without the other, without repercussions." To describe the complexity of the Bakola, who are their brothers and whom they have tried to know and understand for a long time, the Bassa man admitted that the Bakola could neither be known nor understood. "You White people, sisters of Jesus and researchers have been in regular contact with the Bakola. But, have you overcome, known or even understood them? When you do something good for them, they run away from you; when you do for them something wrong, they fear you, respect you, or may come closer to you. The Bakola alone know their mystery, their kind of life, their conception of the forest and the world around it."

The above statements drawn from the blood brothers of the Bako (Nko-Bako, Bassa name for "Pygmies") are striking, because the Bakola/Bassa relationship has not only lasted for long, but also, and above all, is of a parental relation. All the Bassa of Bipindi surveyed (from 20 to over 90 years old) said that they had met the Bako (Pygmies) in their present forests. The Bako belonged to the great patriarch Mbombog Bi Kim Bi Godog Bi Sol of the Log Sol clan.

A mythical recounted among the Bassa gives the following version: the Bako, the Bassa and the dogs were born of the same father. The Nko (Pygmy) was the eldest and most beloved son of his father. This Nko's real name was Mpogo, while the dog or *ngwo* was called Yak, and the Bassa kept his current name. The misfortune of his elder brother Mpogo and his kid brother Yak befell when. Mpogo ate a viper (*peh*) secretly without the permission of his old father. Unfortunately, the news got to the father who summoned his favorite son and asked him: "Is it really you who ate a viper, my son? (*Aman wem, we nu nje pee ?*)" The son pleaded guilty, and his father ordered him to bring back the viper for him to eat. Mpogo and the dog took fright and left immediately for the forest to look for a viper. While they were still in the forest, their father died and was buried. Upon return from the forest a few days later with a viper, they heard the sad news and were struck with dismay. Before his death, the father had cursed Mpogo and his kid brother Yak, bequeathing everything to the Bassa. Deprived of their inheritance, Mpogo and Yak returned to the forest to live there. The two were condemned to always go back to the village to offer their brother vipers and receive from him whatever he wished to give them.

This myth suggests the Bassa and the Bakola had blood relations. The Bakola/Bassa relationship, regardless of the nature and intensity of the relationship (trade, barter, marriage, purchase, or sale), was predetermined by their mythical sire,

and was not affected by the behavior of the Bassa toward the Nkola. Indeed, a traditionalist Bassa did not feel sorry for the situation of his Nkola brother, because such was their fore father's wish.

The forest was henceforth the Nkola's habitat, his range of action, his area of intervention outside of which he could not lead a normal life, as if a fish out of water. But in the forest with his and mastery of the names and uses of trees and medicinal plants, he was the undisputed master of the forest. His kid brother, Yak, the dog, remains his most faithful companion both in the village and in the forest, and his best hunting guide who helped him drive out the most cunning and most resistant rats and porcupines from their hiding places. For the Bassa, everything should follow the course drawn by the ancestors, although it was maintained by the reticence of the Bakola. For the older Bassa and other Bantu groups, the Bakola were considered akin to goods which they rented out, in the same way as fields, farms and plantations, animals and material goods.

Today, the Bassa no longer exploit the heredity factor, and at times treat the Bakola like their true brothers. Some Bassa men marry with Bakola women, but such marriages have never lasted for more than ten years. Most Bassa blamed the Bakola women who "do not know what they want. The Bakola women still want to remain in the forest and hate farm work." The Bakola do not agree with such arguments. They say their women are maltreated by the Bassa men and remain with them as an object of mockery.

Marriages between Bakola men and Bassa women are officially non-existent. A Bassa woman who has sex relationship with a Nkola man is marginalized and driven out of her village. She will be labeled as a "meat woman," "dog woman," "the disgrace of the clan," or "woman without moral values." Frustrated by such nicknames, she would abandon her home, make due apology to her husband's family and return to her natal village. Children born of such unions are marginalized as well.

## 2. *Trade between the Bakola and the Bassa*

Commercial exchanges between the Bakola and the Bassa were few historically and not carried curenly in contrast to the case of the Bakola and the Ngoumba. In the Bakola/Ngoumba exchange for instance, a porcupine is exchanged for 10 cassava sticks ("baton de manioc" in French, a cassava cake molded into oblong sticks and wrapped with leaves); a Gambian rat for 4 cassava sticks, and a quarter of black-backed duiker for 20 cassava sticks. In the Bassa area, however, when a Nkola is called in for farm work, he comes with his wife and children. Before and after work, the Bassa and Bakola drink together the same wine, eat the same meal, and smoke the same tobacco. At the end of the work, the wife of the farm owner invites the Nkola woman to the farm to harvest cassava, cocoyam and plantain. A Bassa asked me, "which of the two barter systems do you suppose the Bako would choose? You say we are cheating the Bako, but who has cheated the other in this case of day's labor? Who profited most? Who is the one to complain now?"

For decades, much money has circulated in the Ngomo camp. A very famous traditional healer there attracts patients from various areas. The youths of Memel I and II camps had worked in the WIJMA Forest Exploitation Company at Log

Ndiga near the Bipindi Commercial Center. While barter trades still exist at Ngomo situated in the forest (one hour of trekking), they have almost disappeared in the camps of Bipindi, where the traditional way of Bakola life has completely changed. Young and old Bakola go to the commercial center everyday to sell game, oil-palm and raffia wine, and to buy starchy foods and manufactured consumer goods, or simply to chat.

The amount of work done by a Bakola family in exchange for a basketful of cassava tubers was not clarified by the head of a Bassa family. However, the current imbalance in the exchange relationship between the Bakola and Bassa, once believed to be brothers, is reflected in the notion of the Bassa that the Bakola do not eat vegetable food nor work for any long time. One Bassa man told me: "You offer them vegetable food (*kpem*), but they do not eat it. When we ask them to work for several consecutive days, they will not do it. They demand, instead, the food each day. Even the wine we drink together. If you ask a Pygmy to go and fell a palm tree, he will ask for his pay on the spot, that is 300 CFA per felled tree. How much confidence can you have on such a man? Do you think he can progress? You are doing to us what the whites did to you, and so are we to the Pygmies. But they won't follow. We cannot force them. You may find solutions that would make the Bako change and need not our food any longer, by cultivating their own farms, by settling on one spot, by going to school, etc."

The above assertions were strongly denied by the Bakola who believed they were duped daily and maltreated by the Bassa who took all of their game and, in case of any resistance or refusal, beat them. When treated in such a way, the older Bakola always dreamed of returning to where they had come from, the Ngoumba land. But, as one Nkola man in his seventies asked himself, "where should we return to? And, why, to whom? Where shall we have land to settle? We shall remain where we have already buried our fathers, wives and sons."

The Ngoumba and the Bassa claimed to be brothers of the Bakola with more or less historical or mythical arguments. How true was this? What did the Bakola think themselves? How can one explain the very disturbing and ceaseless tensions between such old time brothers?

The persistent tensions started perhaps thousands of years ago, and seem to be growing in intensity. The tensions have reached the highest level as the young Bantu heirs of Ngoumba and Bassa now refuse to consider the Bakola as their "property," "legacy," or brothers, not only by simple verbal declarations, but also by action. The tensions seem to stem from the current divergent views between the Bakola and the younger Bantu generations, who are faced with different and more pressing political and economic problems.

The Bassa of the coastal region, as well as the Bakola, are struggling for survival, as they witness the barbarous destruction of one of their last major wealth, the forest, savagely ravaged by the State and its forest exploiters without ever being regenerated. Neither the Bassa nor the Ngoumba have grasped the concept of sustainable management of the environment called for by the environmentalists of the last ten years, but they are at least more conscious than their Bakola.

Today, tensions between the Bakola and Bassa are accelerated even more, owing to the increasing demand for personal and community food crop farms (at least 2

ha for a woman and 7 ha for a community farm), cocoa and coffee gardens, and the increasing and diversifying demand for consumer goods. The increasing number of elite in the villages (in active service or retired) who has no longer strong interest in caring for their "property," the Bakola, provides yet another source of tension (Ngima, 1993).

For lack of biological, archaeological, historical, linguistic, and cultural studies, it is not clear which of the Ngoumba and Bassa is closer to the Nkola. However, the Bakola themselves admit being closer to the Ngoumba than to the other, no matter where their present location is.

### 3. *Destruction of the forest*

The "Bassa Bako" perceive their forests in the same way as the "Ngoumba Bakola." But they are denied by their Bassa brothers the access to and settlement on certain portions of the forest to hunt, set traps and build a house. They are also threatened by the logging companies which reduce the forest into even smaller land with smaller plant and fewer animal species, and by the State that does not defend the interests of the Bakola faced with such threats to their very existence.

The Bassa, who also live off and by the forest, are equally affected, and believe that the forest exploitation policy set up by the government is aimed at annihilating and killing the local villagers. Their rights on their ancestors' forests are ignored and their interests flouted. All that they do now is to sit and watch the government and its forest exploiters ravaging their forests, destroying their farms and plantations, and quietly awaiting their death at home (Ngima, 1993).

### 4. *Bakola/Fang relationship*

The Bakola and the Fang of the Ebimimbang-Bongouana-Mimfombo areas have lived together since the 19th century when the Fang (with the Esseng clan, forming a majority in Ebimimbang) finally settled in the region. Bilo'o Jacques, born around 1905, said that his father met the Bakola in a camp to the west of the Sa'a stream. "They seemed to speak like the Ngoumba, but not exactly," he said. "Because my father who understood Ngoumba very well could not understand all they said in their language." They soon made friends with the Fang and started to assist each other. With time, other Bakola arrived and settled in neighboring forests. They learned the Fang language and today they all speak it fluently. According to the Fang, the Bakola also accepted the name of the Esseng clan, and were adopted and protected by the Fang, when they recognized that the Fang would provide them with bridewealth, gift of cloths, purchase for them hunting tools and other goods.

The heads of the Sa'a and Mindjo camps come from Grand-Zambi and Ndtouah, respectively. They claim their origins from the clans of the Sabvang (Grand-Zambi) and Bimbpalang (Ndtouah), both of which are Kwassio clans. The Fang used to have provided the Bakola with all their needs and the Bakola in return brought to them game from the forest. The relationship was so good that the Bakola even felt proud of it. They were proud of their masters, of what they got from their masters, of belonging to the Bantu family, and of their Bantu brothers and sisters. "If there is foul play and imbalance today, you are responsible for



it,” said a Fang notable. “Who in this land knows what researchers say to ‘our’ Pygmies? You have surely told them that we have been fooling them for years and that they should no longer obey what we tell them to do, what we give them or exchange with them. You make them oppose the villagers who are instead cheated by the ‘Pygmies.’ They take our food everyday on credit and supply us one or two small game (duiker, porcupine, Gambia rat) at most once in two occasions.” The Fang notable added, “the Nkola can sell an animal that has not yet been killed to two or three different persons and succeed in it very well. They move everywhere with tree barks in their mouths or in their pockets to soften our hearts, draw our attention to what they say, and in the end they rob you of your money, your wine, even against your wish.”

If duped several times by a Nkola, the Fang villager would drag him to the gendarmerie or to the chief’s compound, if he respects the law. Otherwise, the best and easiest solution would be to arrest the Nkola by himself and trash him severely. This was because if a villager should take him to the gendarmerie, he would be asked if he did not know he was dealing with a “Pygmy.”

That is why the Fang seem to have lost interest in the Bakola. Most Fang in the area only trade with the Bakola (immediate barter of consumer goods, sale or purchase of goods on sight, reward for services rendered, etc). Two families in Ebimimbang showed a genuine interest in the Bakola, of whom they spoke kindly of. Other families described them as lazy, crooks, and thieves, who encouraged theft and used stolen property. Tensions are very high between the two groups, but are nonetheless neutralized everyday. Neither of them really wants a complete break-down of the relationship, because one often needs the services and products of the other.

There is, however, a case of a Nkola, who has adapted to the modern condition. A man named Nguiang, a Mimfombo Nkola and former pupil of the Bipindi Catholic mission, was brought up by the Sisters of Jesus and the Assumption Sisters of Bipindi, and obtained his First School Leaving Certificate and furthered his secondary education at the Kribi Technical College up to Form Three. He is now a carpenter and earns a living in the area. Anybody who needs his services must send him something or pay him in order to avoid any unpleasant surprises.

##### 5. *Bakola/Boulou relationship*

The Bakola arrived at Mvie in the end of the 19th century. The narrative was given by Mr. Mengue Me Evina Emmanuel, the eldest son of F. Evina Tonkoun. He was born around 1924 at Mvie, and formerly worked for CELLUCAM (Cameroon paper pulp company) and SODECAO (?). He agreed with the story told by Nkola of Mefane, Tsagadigui Samuel in his seventies. He recalled that the Bakola of Mefane came from the Ngoumba land and were recovered by his father Evina Tonkoun on the request and insistence of the chief of the Bakola, Dzoh, father of Tsagadigui. The Biyuele Bakola of Mefane came from Grand-Zambi, while the Litoumbo originated from Bidjouka, both of which are well known Ngoumba villages (see localities in the map).

The Biyuele Bakola who arrived first were received by Evina Tonkoun, who showed them a plot some distance away from the village, today along the Mvie-Minkane road. Evina Tonkoun let the group leader marry, who in turn gave Evina

his entire group members. Evina also asked each of his two brothers, Eyoloko Francois and Mbozo'o Robert, both from the Yenjak clan (Limanjuang), to adopt a Nkola. The two brothers would also let their Bakola marry, if they accepted the offer. This was done. During the same period, Mr. Sasse'e Oba'a, the paramount chief of the Boulou-South residing at Ebemvok to the north of Akom II, came and asked for a Nkola woman from his friend and master of the Mvie Bakola; his request was granted and so he took the woman to Ebemvok and married her with a Nkola man.

The Yenjak of Mvie considered this Evina's act as a loan to his friend Sasse'e. When Evina Tonkoun died, the whole family asked Mengue Me Evina to go to Ebemvok and claim from the paramount chief Sasse'e Oba'a the "heritage" left by his father, that is the Nkola woman he took when his father was still alive. Mengue Me Evina was unfortunately driven away by the chief and his guard and threatened for his impertinence and irreverence.

Tsagadigui Samuel said: "in the days of the ancient notables, everything went well between us. We rendered services to each other; today, nothing is like before. Most Boulou of Mvie do not allow us to farm and build on the plots that belonged to us. Not long ago, they were still fixing the price of our game, whereas none of them wants to be a master or proprietor of the Bakola. You see, they have chased us from the road, and they are the first to come to the forest to open farms, hunt, set traps and request our services..."

As in Ebimimbang, only Engoto Evina Martin, one of F. Evina Tonkoun's sons seemed to be interested in the Bakola of Mefane. He housed them when they were in the village and they hunted regularly for him. In 1995, close to 50 Bakola lived with him for more than three months from March to July to monitor the health of a severely injured daughter, Abomo Belle. Mr. Engoto's wife had allowed the Bakola to use her entire kitchen. In return, all the game killed in hunts were wisely sold and controlled by Engoto. The well-being of the Bakola was not a concern of the entire Boulou of Mvie area, but was merely a personal problem of Engoto, who "uses them and eats their game. If some Bakola would murder his wife, Engoto would take the murderers to the Akom II Gendarmerie." Some Boulou notables acknowledged that their fathers, "masters of the 'Pygmies,' " bullied, maltreated and cheated the Bakola whenever they wanted. But today as the Bakola no longer have their masters in villages, they are not subject to anybody. That is why the Bakola themselves say: "Ndo ndo ese a nto'o *bivele* (All pepper has become red or ripe; i.e., everybody has already become equal)."

Most of the continuing tensions between the Bakola of Mefane and the Boulou of Mvie originated from land disputes. The former Bakola settlements were situated along the road. The local authorities seemed to take this thorny problem at heart and hoped to solve it without delay, but the situation has prevailed for at least 20 years. They acknowledged that this part of the forest effectively belonged to the Bakola who had lived there since the 1940's, having acquired the land from their former master, Evina Tonkoun. They also added that graves of the Bakola could still be found there today. But it is doubtful if the village head or notable would dare to displace their brothers for the sake of the Bakola.

#### 6. *Bakola/Mvae-Ntounmou relationship*

The movement of the Bakola to the Mvae (Campo Subdivision, south of Kribi) and Ntounmou (Ma'an Subdivision, in the Ntem valley) settlements is very recent. Mvae dignitaries (70 years old and over), Ela Wo'o Jacques, Minko Gaston of Bouandjo (deceased), and Obam Rene of Akak, situated their arrival and presence in the area around the 1920's. They arrived from the Mabea territories of Bvoun-gangouombi and Bongandi (at the banks of River Lobe), Kourmintoun (at the banks of river Kienke) and the Ngoumba territories of Makoure and Grand-Zambi. About twenty Bakola observed in the Ntounmou lands all arrived in the mid 1950's from the forests of Lolodorf. They were of the Bigbally clan, same as that of the founder of the town of Loule-Dorf (now Lolodorf).

Although linguistically and numerically a minority in the Mvae and Ntounmou lands, the Bakola successfully retained their food culture, language and other aspects of culture, as well as their attachment to the Kwassio. Less integrated into the life of the Mvae and the Ntounmou, the Bakola live in small groups of five or ten persons along the road or in the forest, under the protection of the villager. Nothing can take place in their camp without consulting the villagers whether they are in the forest or on the roadside. The arrival of strangers at the camp triggered interventions from outside villagers.

Despite their early settlement in the Mvae and Ntounmou villages, the Bakola did not adopt the names of these villagers' clans, and maintained their clans, sub-clans and lineage they brought from the Kwassio (Ngoumba, Mabea) land. Hence the Nazareth Bakola clan members (of Litoumbo, Sabinze, Satega and Biwandi) still resemble in their appearance the Mabea Bakola of Lobe, Nlende-Dibe and Lokoundje, and the Ngoumba Bakola of the Kribi-Lolodorf road, from which they originated. The same applies to the Bakola of Bouandjo, Biyengue, Bibira, Mim-bosso, Boussibilika, Ngoulo, Bissono and Mebiah.

The following narrative shows how the Nazareth Bakola arrived at their present location and why they retained the language and clan affiliation of their Kwassio. The story was recounted by Makier Jean, the head of the Nazareth Bakola camp in August 1996:

Bibvuo and his father left the Makoure village in the Ngoumba land (along the Kribi-Bipindi road in the Kribi Subdivision) just before the Second World War and settled at Lobe. Bibvuo, the grandfather of Makier Jean, married a woman of the Binwanbo clan, but was unable to pay the bridewealth all by himself. The Bantu Ngoumba master in Makoure, from the same Litoumbo clan neither could fully assist him. Bibvuo then went to a Bantu Mabea of the Litoumbo clan in Lobe, called Nguiebouri Mimpapa Bouombpoumbo. Nguiebouri paid the bridewealth and asked the Nkola man to leave Makoure, a Ngoumba village, and settle in at Lobe, in a Mabea village called Bibvun.

Ngoundi Bibvuo, the father of Makier Jean, was born at Makoure before the negotiations finished between the Litoumbo Nkola, Bibvuo and Nguiebouri, the Mabea of Lobe, who belonged to the same Litoumbo clan. Ngoundi's first son was named Nguiebouri Ngoundi after the Mabea who paid the bridewealth for his mother. Nguiebouri Ngoundi Emmanuel died in Nazareth, blind and old but active. All the Ngoundi Bibvuo's eight children were born at Bibvun near Lobe.

In the middle of the Second World War, Ngoundi Bibvuo decided to search his elder brother Mabouang who had gone hunting in Ntembi, on the banks of River Ntem, because their father worried after the latter in the border area between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. But the brother was never found. Then the searchers settled at Bingoule, in a place called "*Nzouer su ma gie*" (the elephant brushing its teeth), now called Bongola, situated to the southeast of Campo, near the Bongola rapids where elephants frequently came to quench their thirst. For the Bakola, they seemed to be cleaning their teeth.

"From Nzouer Su Ma Gie, where we had lived for long by hunting and eating wild yams and fruits, we went to Equatorial Guinea," because after a long and fruitless search in Cameroonian forests, the searchers became interested in the area on the other side of River Ntem in Equatorial Guinea. They, however, returned some years later and settled at Mabiogo, near the Mabea village, where they cultivated their first cassava fields. Ngoundi Bbvuo said, "We interacted with the Mvae living nearby. After the departure of the villagers for Equatorial Guinea around 1980, the Mvae village head, Akou'ou, asked us to take over the plank buildings left by them."

The Bakola living at least for 60 years in areas inhabited by the Fang, Bassa, Bakoko, Evuzok, Boulou and Mvae came as a result of serious social conflicts with their former masters (the Kwassio-Ngoumba), looking for new protectors, who would be more humane, open and prompt in assisting them in times of necessity. As they were accustomed to being so protected, they easily found new protectors and masters among the Mvae, Boulou and Bassa. They did not however abandon the formerly adopted clans of the Kwassio. In the Campo and Ngoulo areas, the Mvae, Boulou and Mabea most frequently use Bakola labor force, and are the beneficiaries of the barter and other trade with the Bakola.

The perception of the forest and its industrial exploitation in recent years is almost identical among all the Bakola of the coastal region. They are "men without a voice," and often their voice is drowned in their Bantu neighbors', which itself is not exactly vociferous. This renders human relationship as well as commercial exchanges between them considerably complex. For all their historical, geographical, linguistic, cultural and socio-economic divergences and /or attachments described above, the Bakola and Bantu peoples seem to be in a similar situation with regard to their fate in the destruction of their forest environment. Decisions on the forest exploitation have been made on higher levels, without consideration for the local land ownership and the livelihood dependent on the forest. There is no compensation from the forest exploiters, who have contracted with the administrative, political and military authorities, but supposedly equipped with the plans for forest regeneration and restocking of water.

## CURRENT BAKOLA/BANTU RELATIONSHIPS

In contrast to the Bakola/Kwassio relationship strongly based on language, clan affiliation, common ancestors and history, the relationships of the Bakola with the Bassa, Fang, and other Bantu groups are apparently very fragile. But the daily life of the Bakola in different Bantu areas and the treatment they receive from their presumed former "protectors" are practically the same.

The placement of Bakola camps no longer depends on their affiliation to a specific Bantu clan or a master. There is no longer any control as ever the association of a Nkola with a specific person, or with a particular clan. Barter and other commercial trade have been liberalized. The choice of a "master" is optional and is no longer based on the membership of clan, sub-clan, family or lineage (Ngima, 1993). Hence the proliferation of new "masters" to the Bakola took place in the entire coastal region, which entailed the consent of both parties with regards to religious authorities (missionaries in general, Catholics in particular), gun ownership, status as a civil servant, economic relationship with retailers and business men, and ordinary friendship with the villagers (Ngima, 1993; 1995).

Although the Bakola/Ngoumba (Kwassio) relationship been increasingly loosened, when a Ngoumba and a Nkola meet in the Bassa land or elsewhere, the former relationship can quickly and easily be re-established. Barter and trade between the two parties are more fraternal, and intermarriages take place more frequently. Thus, relationship between the Bakola and the Ngoumba (Kwassio) seems to weaken slowly. Therefore, the Kwassio land has a stable Bakola population, more permanent camps, more intermarriages (pairs of Ngoumba man and Nkola woman), and more Bakola cocoa growers than all the Bakola in other areas put together.

Money has now become the most used medium of exchange between the Bakola and the Fang, Boulou, Bassa and Mvae Bantu. In contrast, barter is most important between the Bakola and the Kwassio who have a closer social and linguistic tie. A survey was conducted from February to March in 1995 on commercial transactions between the various Bakola groups (the Mefane and Mebiah camps in Boulou area, Sa'a and Mindjo in Fang area, Antande and Ndtouah in Ngoumba area and Ngomo in Bassa area) and four Bantu groups. Twenty animals (porcupines and duikers) were killed by the Bakola in two weeks, where fifteen were sold for cash against five bartered at Mvie and Akok in Boulou area. There were sixteen game animals sold against four bartered at Ebimimbang in Fang area. There were fourteen game sold against six bartered at Memel I and II in Bassa area. By contrast, five game were sold against fifteen bartered at Madoungou and Ndtouah in Ngoumba (Kwassio) area. All the Bantu groups in the studied region are as good hunters as the Bakola in trapping. The Boulou, Fang and Mvae are unanimous in that they have more game in their forest than elsewhere, which may be supported by the meat markets (*ovianga*) found in every village in their areas. The difference in the ratios of barter to cash sale is not, therefore, based on the difference in the scarcity of game supply.

Other Bakola services requested by the Bantu, such as farm work, compound cleaning, laundry and tree felling, also showed to reflect Bakola's affinity toward

the Ngoumba. The Boulou, Mvae, Fang and Bassa refer to the Ngoumba as “the ‘Pygmies’ are brothers to the Ngoumba. The Ngoumba are ‘Pygmies,’ don’t you see that they are of the same height?”

Rendering of services were, up to recently, clear signs of the close links between the Bantu (*mi*) and “his” Pygmy (Nkola, indicating for the *mi* wealth in terms of men and property, but also social status. The Bakola today consider themselves independent (“our equals in every term”) and the Bantu heirs of former masters no longer assume the role of master. So the Bakola ask, “ why not sell our game freely to the person whom we choose, settle where we desire, freely choosing our ‘friend’ or new ‘master?’ ”

With the information described above on the relationships between the Bakola and the various Bantu groups, we will examine the past, present and future, artisanal as well as industrial, forest exploitation in the coastal region of Cameroon, where more than four logging companies are operating. We will also pay attention to the individual and collective fears and aspirations of the peoples in this region, whose life entirely depends on the rich forest resources they inherited from their ancestors.

## THE LOCAL POPULATIONS AND INDUSTRIAL EXPLOITATION OF THEIR FORESTS

### I. Importance of the Forest to the Local Peoples

In a sense, the Bakola lived like other nomadic forest hunters in central Africa (Bahuchet, 1985). They had a society with the pre-colonial model of “domestic community” described by French Marxist Meillassoux (cited by Beja, 1987), where hunting and gathering were the dominant forms of production. The forest was the collective property of the community. Strangers staying in a camp also had a free access to the forest to hunt, gather, and clear the fields.

The forest is a whole sacred universe. It is not only the abode of the gods (both good and bad), but rather, the very symbol of the life and survival of the Bakola. The forest was offered to them by God (“Nzambe” in Bagielli-Bakola language) to feed and protect them through hunting, gathering and traditional medicine. They depend on their forests not only to carry out a diversity of subsistence activities, but also for their personal achievement and fulfillment. Many living and non-living objects in the forest, individually or collectively, symbolize the life and society of the Bakola, and are translated in myths, recited and handed down for generations.

The entire Bakola life is linked to the forest. Great trees in great demand by logging companies such as the *azobe* (*Lophira alata*) and *oveng* (*Ghibourtia tessmania*) remain sacred for many clans. All the new-borns destined to become great and influential chiefs used to spend 2-3 nights under these trees, “fed and blessed” by the ancestors. Some animals, big or small, are also considered as totems by some or other clans, either for their courage, grandeur, strength, ferociousness, or for their meekness and cunning. If by chance any of such animals is killed or

eaten by a person, he will fall ill and eventually die, if he does not receive proper remedy for it. He is required to perform atonement and purification rites.

These restrictions and taboos were laid down by their ancestors and form the basis of their society, and no Bakola would dare to violate them. Since the violators have been actually recorded to have fallen ill (but cured), there is no doubt an element of truth in the prescriptions, which uninitiated persons may consider as "meaningless." There is, however, much more psychological and mental elements than proven and verified. There was even a case where an entire camp disappeared because of a violation of totem taboos. Most people still observe the clan and individual totems, just as the Christians interdict meat on Friday, and the Muslims interdict pork. These restrictions provide the Bakola with a moral basis of their society. As T. H. Green (cited by Douglas, 1971) wrote: "man's awareness of God was in various forms the moralizing agent of human society, or better still, the creative principle of this same society. The existence of specific duties and their observance, the spirit of self sacrifice, the moral law and the respect it inspires in the most abstract and the most absolute form, evidently suggests the existence of a society."

The forest is not only the symbol of the representations of the Bakola life, but also the very essence of their life. It still accommodates the ancestors and the gods who facilitate hunting and multiply gathering resources, despite an intensive and permanent deforestation. The Bakola identify themselves with the forest in general, with trees and animals in particular. They express gratitude to *minkuta*, the forest spirit, which gives them the power to transform into a tree or animal, and to become an integral part of the forest, without ever being spotted by enemies and Bantu pursuers. Hence, a Nkola said, "the forest is us, it is for us, it is our food, our life; You villagers, stay at your home in the village, on the road."

Despite the upheavals of the macro socio-economic system in contemporary history, especially in the production sector, no fundamental change was brought to the subsistence and procurement techniques of the Bakola. However, food procurement by the Bakola of the regions under study has undergone certain modifications, linked not only to the ecosystem, but also to the increasing economic relationship with a wider society. Most of the Bakola, even those living deep in the forest, have now become more sedentary and cultivate the fields. The adoption of new agricultural or synergetic techniques is progressing differently from place to place, and is faster where the Bakola live permanently with the Bantu people. But if the forest remained sacred and provided an inexhaustible source of foodstuffs, way of life and social system, no Bakola would think of endogenous development of their life and society.

All the Bantu groups in this region have a similar perception of their forests. For them, the forests were handed down by their ancestors; the forests belonged to them and constituted their major source of life, wealth, and salvation. "We can commit even a crime to defend and conserve our forest, if we are to be robbed of it. But we are powerless with the State authorities and logging companies," the Bantu said. The forest, for the Bantu, was described as "our gods, our animals, our medicine, our trees and all our food lie therein." (Ngima, 1993)

Before the arrival of WIJMA in the current exploitation zone in the 1980's, Nicholis, SICO, KRITIKOS, CFK, and other companies had already been operating. Logging may have improved somewhat the living standards of the local population by providing them jobs, and by building minimum infrastructure for the village life, such as the construction of conveyance roads and farm-to-market roads, bridges, schools, health centers and playgrounds. The local population was expected to benefit from the access to cheap and durable building materials. Moreover, new and small timber processing plants were promised to create jobs. Taxes were created for an endogenous development. Sustainable management of the forest environment was also expected.

However, none of the above plan has materialized. Instead, there is total decadence: some roads have dangerously deteriorated and have become impractical, while others have simply been abandoned; schools, dispensaries and playgrounds have not been constructed; food is not distributed to the local population; bridges have broken down and are not repaired; three quarters of the employees, including the unskilled laborer, are brought from afar. Numerous meetings held in Kribi, Campo, Ma'an and Ebolowa or in the villages with the State, political authorities, the local populations and the forest exploiters have produced nothing, and there is much anxiety in the rural communities surveyed.

## II. Grievances

The forest has degraded because of lack of adequate control on logging. The Government does not make enough effort to acknowledge and respect the rights of the local population over the forest. The Government issues logging licenses to foreign companies, as well as the nationals, without monitoring how logging is actually carried out. The tree species are felled without proper selection, and huge amount of unused logs are piled in the bush or along roadsides. Our survey in the forest of logging areas revealed such a sad situation. The local people told us, "when we asked the forest exploiters why they were messing up our forest, they would not even answer our question." Faced with the current wanton exploitation of the forests, they all worried about the future of the forest, which is theirs and that of their offspring.

In most areas, the grievances of the local people are not paid due attention, in spite of the prescriptions of the contract specifications (1973 Law). The grievances commonly heard from the villagers are the lack of a school, a dispensary, roads, bridges, and a football stadium. None of these requests has been granted, to which the villagers have reacted by blocking roads, setting fire to bridges, even threatening forest exploiters, who run to administrative authorities for help. The forest exploiters would laconically tell them, "Go and see your authorities, because we have settled everything with them." The authorities have threatened the villagers and sent in the forces of law to track them.

Studies conducted in different areas by TROPENBOS hardly satisfy anybody, as TROPENBOS is often confused with WIJMA or SICO, the logging companies. For



instance, radicals even believe that TROBENBOS is rather interested in exploiting the forest than conserving it, and that it is in connivance with other exploiters.

A Fang notable said to me: "Do you think we destroy our forests more than the 'whites' who have heavy machinery? How will you protect the trees and animals in the forest, when you grant licenses to forest exploiters? Just imagine how long we shall take to destroy such big trees, or to kill all the animals? With our small axes, we cannot fell many trees in so short a time; our traditional snares cannot kill as many animals as do the modern guns sold to us by the 'whites.' You even forbid us to fell trees that enable us to build decent houses, to kill and eat animals for a few grams of protein, but at the same time you offer the trees to the 'whites.' Now that everything is disappearing, you are asking the same devastators and plunderers to come and protect the forests they had ransacked. Who are you mocking? Do the 'whites' really love us by doing this to us? Has the State of Cameroon ever checked the work being done here in the forest? What measures have been taken against the forest exploiters who plunder our wealth each day? When we come to express our complaints to you that we cannot get even the minimum we requested, you instead threaten us. What else do you need from us, when you repair your vehicles in their garages here in Ebimimbang? You ask for their gaz-oil, you receive sums of money to 'shut the mouth, eyes and ears' before the horrible extortion. You assist them in bullying the local population; you watch trees, even the protected species, being felled and abandoned in forest for many years without raising an alarm and with your shameless complicity."

The notable of Ebimimbang village expressed clearly in Fang language the current state of forest destruction and the wait-and-see attitude of the local people toward it: "*Me fan mara me nto ve essa'asa-ngomna a ve bor bie ne be nzu sadzam bi ne ngul ya bo esse ki ngomna emen nye a bele mefan-bia bi to fa'a ve ne bi nzeque.* (Our forests are disputed by all. State authorities send their people to come and sap them without control or benefit. There is nothing we can do against them. Now, our forests are theirs. We are here just like speechless tree stumps, deaf, dumb and blind)."

The Bantu and Bakola peoples, however, still hope to reap one day the benefits from the forest, if they participate in its rigorous management. The policy of the government of Cameroon, relayed to the developmental NGOs operating in the country, is that, with the uncontrolled exploitation of the forests, everybody should practice agriculture, stock breeding and pisciculture in order to attain self-sufficiency in food supply at family and national levels. And since decision-makers believe that the traditional subsistence techniques (hunting, gathering and fishing) are so out-dated such techniques can no longer be promoted. The Government and those NGO deny one of our Cameroonian traditional cultures, which eventually is prone to disappear. There is obviously a need to do something to save the local people and their way of life.

Everything is being destroyed today, and the fate of the minority groups is tied to that of the majority (Beja, 1987). While the ancestors worshipped the forest accordingly, it is true that some of the new generations are turning their backs to such practices, as they are faced with new realities: Christian religion, government laws, occupation in modern economic sectors, and destruction of the forest by logging companies, forced cohabitation of the Bakola and the Bantu groups, regular visit by tourists, and other external pressures.

### III. Expectations

The following is the list of requests made by the local peoples during the survey.

1. Involvement of the internal and external elite in decision-making process on matters relating to the exploitation of their forests.
2. Fulfillment of their expressed needs by investing in the construction of roads, dispensaries or health centers, schools, football stadiums, cultural animation centers, etc.
3. Halting of the disorderly logging.
4. Protection of the species with great value to the Bakola and Bantu life: medicinal plants, fruits trees, wild yams, and rare and endangered species, etc.
5. Better regulation and monitoring of the work carried out in the forest by the exploiters.
6. Inducing forest exploiters to systematically regenerate the important timber-producing species in order to enable future generations to equally benefit from the forests.
7. Employment of the youths in the companies so as to reduce unemployment and rural exodus.

### IV. Proposals

I will list below basic proposals as a guide to be followed by the Government, NGOs and forest exploitation companies responsible for rural development, investment and work in rural areas, in order to ensure overall success in the sustainable management policy of tropical forests.

1. Carry out ethnographical studies before starting the projects, in order to know and master the ways and customs, and the social organization of the local populations, as well as the size of the various populations, the ecosystem in which they live, to master interactions among different Bantu and Bakola groups and between them and the forest;
2. Understand the customary law of the local people and its role in matters relating to the forest;
3. Take into account the ancestral priorities in the forest and compensating its legitimate heirs;
4. Understand the various perceptions of the local peoples of their forest in order to decide to whom the development priorities should be directed for improving their living conditions;
5. Assess and choose major construction projects, such as roads and dispensary that serve all the local populations concerned;
6. Involve at all cost of the local populations in making decisions concerning the sustainable management of their forests.

## CONCLUSION

The Bakola and Bantu relationships are centuries-long and very complex and difficult to quantify and qualify. But by staying at the villages of Ngoumba, Bassa, Fang, Mvae, Ntoundou and Bakola, I was fortunate to collect reliable and important information on this relationship, as described above. The introduction of money into their system of exchange, the impacts of logging companies on their way of life, and the intervention of the Government and NGOs in their daily activities have brought about changes in their thoughts on the present situation, and their historical and mythological discourse. The interviews also highlighted the changes in their mutual relationships which, though long-standing and of a parental and friendly nature, remain perpetually in conflict in many respects.

For a study of the perception of the five ethnic groups about the forest and its overexploitation, a survey of over at least two seasons (the dry and rainy seasons) may be called for. It is known, for instance, that for the Bakola, the forest has varying socio-economic and magico-religious value throughout the year. In the long dry season from mid-November to mid-March, intensive net hunting, sacrifices to forest gods, and frequent Bakola-Bantu trade take place. In the long rainy season from August to November, by contrast, trapping is carried out in place of net hunting, but less frequently, and an imbalanced relationship is observed between the Bakola and the Bantu. Similarly, for the village populations, activities and needs linked to the forest are different in the two seasons of the year.

The forest for the Bakola is the "providential purveyor of abundant and varied food (Turnbull, 1961)." While the Ngoumba, Bassa, Fang, and other Bantu peoples in the study area feel insecure and worried when they penetrate the unknown forest, the Bakola feel secure and may find in it "their true identity, and especially confident liberty which is their most precious asset" (Turnbull, 1961).

Father Schmidt (1960) writes that for the "Pygmies," "God is the forest and the forest is God." Turnbull adds: "they are a people who have succeeded in finding in the forest a metaphysical element which gives a sense to life, which life is wonderful, full of joy and bliss, despite its difficulties, problems and catastrophe." Because the logging industries have profound impacts on the life of the Bakola and Bantu peoples, their traditional medicines in particular, political and economic changes brought about by the logging industries should be examined in greater detail for a better understanding of these peoples, and for solving the problems accruing from the relationships between the Bakola and Bantu and between them and the forests.

## NOTES

- (1) The field survey in the WIJMA exploitation area was carried out with funding by the Programme TROPENBOS Cameroon, a Dutch NGO based at Kribi, which carries out fundamental as well as applied studies on the sustainable management of Cameroon's tropical forest. TROPENBOS trains young Cameroonian and Dutch students who are preparing their theses under the supervision of seasoned lecturers and researchers from both countries.

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